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SUBJECT: VLAAMS BELANG BLUES: LONG STANDING PARTY DIVISIONS
CREATE PARTY RIFT

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The long-festering divisions inside the far-right Vlaams Belang (VB) have resulted in an open rift, with three party mainstays opting to resign from the party's executive board. Party President Bruno Valkeniers has managed to impose some face-saving cosmetic changes to the party's image, but hardliners stay at the helm. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Member of Parliament Bruno Valkeniers became Vlaams Belang's president in March 2008. This sleek businessman appeared to be the right man too steer the party onto a more moderate course than that set by the party's far right predecessor, Vlaams Blok. His predecessor as president, Frank Vanhecke, had been anointed by the party's founding fathers, but he had largely failed to impose his own style on the party. Party hardliners, Flemish Parliament floor leader Filip Dewinter and federal representative Gerolf Annemans had pointed to the party's electoral successes to foreclose any internal discussions.

¶3. (SBU) The new party's first great disappointment came in 2006 when the party failed to win control over the Antwerp local government Lijst De Decker (LDD), the party of Representative Jean-Marie Dedecker, and with the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) of Bart De Wever, on ways to form a strong right-wing alliance. Talks on a "Forza Flandria" soon collapsed because of internal rivalries inside the Vlaams Belang and the incapacity of VB to shed its far-right radical trappings.

¶4. (SBU) The 2009 regional and European elections were another setback for the party. It tumbled from 19 percent of the Flemish vote in the 2007 general election to 15 percent in 2009. Valkeniers and other moderate party officials argued that the party was sitting on a lot of cash because of public subsidies given to political parties, but that it had no real political weight because the mainstream Flemish political parties refused all political dealings with the Vlaams Belang (a policy known as the "cordon sanitaire"). This made Valkeniers opt for a change of style. He argued, logically, that the first condition to win over the other parties was to refrain from spewing racist hatred. Still, Valkeniers' proposal unleashed a bitter confrontation that pitted Vanhecke and former regional parliamentarian Marie-Rose Mrel against Annemans and Dewinter. The confrontation between the two clans peaked when Dewinter obstructed Morel's attempt to become the party's deputy president.

¶5. (SBU) During a party council meeting on November 28, Valkeniers managed to win approval for a watered-down "new vision." But at the very moment his text was being adopted, Vanhecke, Morel, and Flemish parliamentarian Karim Van Overmeire announced that they were quitting the party executive, exposing more clearly than ever before the deep division inside the party.

¶6. (SBU) Under the "new vision" adopted by the party council, the Vlaams Belang will now reach out to other parties and advocacy groups. It will adopt a milder style and it will seek to enlist a broader range of party activists.

Valkeniers can find some solace in the fact that after all these years the Vlaams Belang has come to terms with the need to reassess its current position and future. But his "new vision" will have to be implemented by an executive board composed of nationalist hardliners loyal to Dewinter and Annemans.

[17](#). (SBU) Comment: As long as the end of Belgium remains its stated goal and the party cannot refrain from baiting immigrants, there is very little hope that Vlaams Belang can successfully reach out to other political parties. Its current problems provide the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) and Dedecker's LDD with an even greater opportunity to attract disenchanted Vlaams Belang voters. The N-VA especially stands to gain, as it now can position itself more clearly as the standard-bearer for democratic nationalism in Flanders.
End Comment.

GUTMAN

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